

History Comes Alive!

Tales From the City Archives



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Was Fred Eaton the 'Real' Father of LA's Aqueduct?

■ Who was more responsible for the L.A. Aqueduct, Fred Eaton or William Mulholland?

While writing last month's issue on the past Mayors of Los Angeles, I kept finding more and more interesting information about Mayor Frederick S. Eaton. It became obvious that this man impacted Los Angeles in so many ways, that he deserved an article for himself. So here is Mr. Eaton's story.

Fred Eaton was born in Los Angeles in September 1855. He was the sixth American child born in the City. His father was Judge Benjamin S. Eaton, who migrated with his wife, Helena Hayes Eaton, in 1849 from New England. Young Eaton was born in an adobe building, on what is now the intersection of First and Spring Streets. Later, this building became the first City jail. Conflicting stories note that the Eatons, who were considered high society at that time, lived on what was then known as "up on the hill," on Fort Moore, that now houses the current Board of Education.

The future Mayor was educated in Los Angeles area public schools. Later, he attended Santa Clara College. From the time Eaton was young, he had been interested in civil engineering, where he focused on the discipline toward gaining his higher education degree. During that time period, Fred Eaton also worked for the City as a surveyor and engineer. This time period for the City was a transitional era between Spanish and American traditions.

At the ripe old age of 14, in 1869, youthful Frederick entered a citywide competition to assist in reconstructing the Old Plaza, formerly the town square, near Olvera Street. He won the \$100 prize for his drawings of original designs. These drawings were later generally adapted in the Old Plaza area when the City was reconstructed. Remnants of the past designs can still be seen today.

Fred Eaton persisted through his entire life to be dedicated to the City, as well as contributing to the development of this future megalopolis. In 1885, he was appointed City Surveyor and Engineer,



The Old Plaza, formerly the town square near Olvera Street, in 1869, as partially designed by Fred Eaton.

where he was partially responsible for mapping and establishing City property. This was a one-year term; eventually the term City Surveyor was abolished. During the years 1889-90 he was appointed City Engineer. During this active period, Eaton designed a sewer system, the precursor and core of today's contemporary system. He was also the chief engineer for the Los Angeles Railway Company. He built the first electric railway in the City, which was one of the first attempts for this new type of transportation in the nation.

In time Fred Eaton became the superintendent of a privately owned Los Angeles Water Company. This company often doubled as the first volunteer fire department back in the 1870s. Fred Eaton was one of the robust firefighter enthusiasts. This company was an evolution that grew out of dire needs of constant and consistent water for the citizens of Los Angeles. A larger-than-life relationship developed out of this company that would eventually change the far-reaching literal, political and economic

landscape for the City of Los Angeles. The names of the two "Giants" were Fred Eaton and William Mulholland.

Water, or lack of it, in Los Angeles was always the main topic of concern since incorporation of the City in 1850. Such was the case when Frederick S. Eaton ran for mayor in 1898. His platform revolved around bringing water to Los Angeles from sources beyond the currently used water of the Los Angeles river. In 1892, Eaton traveled north more than 200 miles to Inyo County, specifically the Owens Valley, where the limitless snow water would flow into the Owens River. With the eye of an engineer, the future Mayor brought to the citizenry the idea, the vision of transporting water from the Owens River to Los Angeles. He won the ticket because of these incredible concepts.

For years Eaton and Mulholland disagreed about the L.A. River's capability to provide water to the ever-growing Los Angeles population. Mulholland, who had been a relative newcomer to the City, claimed that the river would provide water for another 50 years. Eaton, a native, explained what would happen with the event of a drought. After a decade of water deprivation, Mulholland finally understood Eaton's point of view.

Mayor Eaton was in office from 1898 to 1900. The new century in Los Angeles saw an increase of the population to 100,000. Water, once again, was the focus of the mindset of the local populace. San Pedro, after much heated discussion and debate, became a modern Los Angeles harbor. The Los Angeles City Water Company had been privately owned since 1868. With the expiration of the lease in 1898, City officials fought to return the water to a publicly run system. The proprietors argued to preserve their position as owners of the City's water. But, after much negotiations and a heated

and contested bond election, the water rights were, once again, returned to the City for \$2 million in 1902.

Upon retiring from formal civic duty after 1900, Fred Eaton continued his dedication to bringing water from the north to Los Angeles. In 1902 he worked in association with William Mulholland, who was then the chief engineer for the Los Angeles City Water Works, a precursor to Public Works Bureau of Aqueduct, a precursor to the DWP. Sadly, Eaton and Mulholland had a number of disagreements that continued for years. But that is a story that deserves its own article.

At the same time, Fred Eaton moved from Los Angeles to Long Valley in Mono County, where he had a ranch. In 1906 he incorporated 12,000 acres in what would eventually be called the Eaton Land and Cattle Company. In time, the City acquired the Eaton ranch properties to use as extension for water development. All the while, he continued to work with the most important federal, state, county and City individuals relating to water reclamation.

Frederick S. Eaton passed away in 1934 at the age of 78 at the home of one of his children. He supposedly died bankrupt from many issues relating to the Owens Valley project. That, too, is worthy of another article.

Finally, it has been known for years that the Public Works regarded Fred Eaton as the "Father of the Los Angeles Aqueduct," while William Mulholland was given that reverential title by the DWP. Either way, we Los Angelenos owe a great debt of gratitude to these two giants. For as historians have noted over the years, "Los Angeles was the most improbable city without water," or, "Los Angeles is a city in spite of itself without water..."

Photos are from the Security Pacific Collection, Los Angeles Public Library Photo Archive, courtesy Carolyn Cole, Director



Fred Eaton



William Mulholland



The Owens River in 1912.